Saint Maximilian Kolbe

He was born Raymund Kolbe on January 8, 1894 in Poland (part of the Russian Empire at the time) the second of five sons of a German father and a Polish mother, who were devout Catholics of modest means. When he was a boy he took a scolding from his mother to heart, and he asked the Mother of God what was to become of him. She appeared to him with two crowns (a white one for purity and a red one for martyrdom) asking him which would he accept. He accepted both. He later contracted tuberculosis and, though he recovered, he remained frail all his life. In 1907, Kolbe and his elder brother decided to join the Franciscans. In 1910, he entered the novitiate and professed his first vows in 1911, adopting the name Maximilian. In 1912, he was sent to Kraków, and then to Rome, where he studied philosophy, theology, mathematics, and physics. When he took final vows in 1914, in Rome, he adopted the names Maximilian Maria, due to his deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. He earned a doctorate in philosophy in 1915, was ordained in 1918, and earned a doctorate in theology in 1919. During his time as a student in Rome, he witnessed shameful attacks against the Pope by Freemasons, who distributed pamphlets defaming him. This inspired Kolbe to organize the Immaculata Movement to convert sinners and enemies of the Catholic Church, specifically the Freemasons, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

In 1919, he returned to the newly independent Poland, where he founded a monastery that became a major publishing center, a radio station, and several other organizations. The Immaculata friars used the latest printing techniques to publish catechetical tracts, a daily newspaper with a circulation of 230,000, and a monthly magazine (“The Knight of the Immaculata”) with a circulation of over one million. Kolbe also used radio to spread the Catholic faith and to speak out against the atrocities of the Nazi regime. Between 1930 and 1936, he went on a series of mission trips to Japan, where he founded a monastery, a Japanese newspaper, and a seminary. He also brought the movement to India. In his absence the monastery in Poland began to publish a daily newspaper, which became Poland's top-seller. Kolbe was accused of anti-semitism based on the contents of this newspaper, which allegedly made claims of a Zionist plot for world domination. In rebuttal to these accusations his defenders point to the fact that Kolbe sheltered and fed 2000 Jewish refugees in this very same monastery during the WWII. In 1936 he returned home due to poor health. After the Nazi Invasion of Poland in 1939, the Gestapo detained him for a time. On February 17, 1941, he was arrested and imprisoned again. In May he was transferred to Auschwitz, where he was tattooed with #16670. At the end of July 1941, three prisoners escaped from the camp. In retaliation the commandant randomly picked 10 men to be starved to death in an underground bunker. When one of the selected men cried out, “My wife! My children!” Kolbe volunteered to take his place. In the starvation cell he led the condemned men in song and prayer, and assured them they would soon be with Mary in Heaven. Each time the guards checked, they found him kneeling in the middle of the cell, looking calmly at them. After two weeks only Kolbe remained alive. The guards wanted the bunker emptied, so they gave him a lethal injection of carbolic acid, for which he offered his arm. His body was cremated on 15 August, the feast of the Assumption of Mary.

He was beatified by Pope Paul VI in 1971, and canonized by Pope John Paul II on October 10, 1982, with the man, with whom he traded places in Auschwitz, in attendance. Pope John Paul II declared Kolbe a martyr of charity and “the Patron Saint of Our Difficult Century”. He is also the patron saint of drug addicts, political prisoners, families, journalists, prisoners, and the pro-life movement.